

Disillusioned

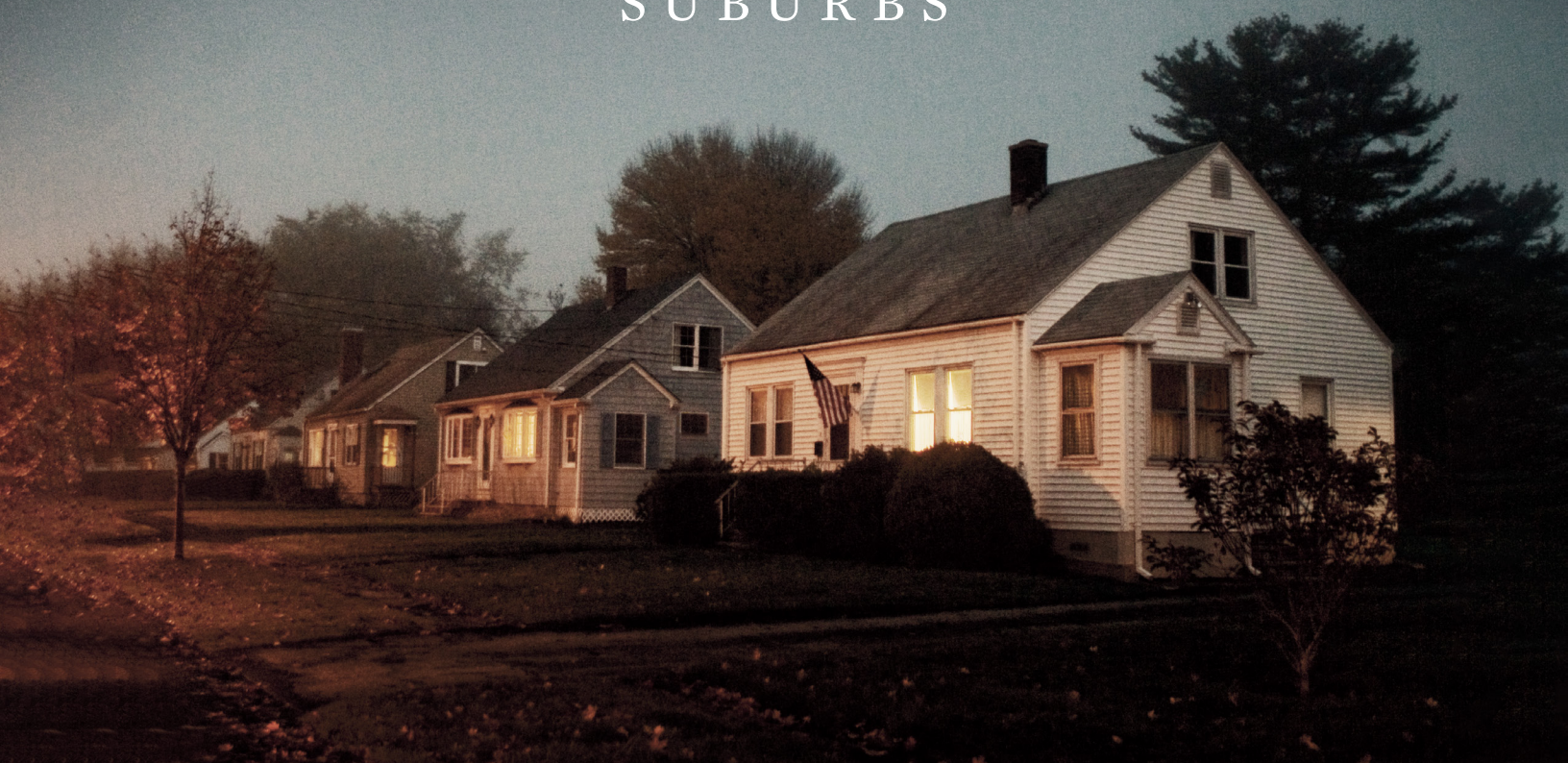
FIVE FAMILIES

and the

UNRAVELING

of AMERICA'S

SUBURBS



BENJAMIN HEROLD

— A Q&A WITH AUTHOR BENJAMIN HEROLD —

A Q&A with Author **Benjamin Herold**

1. After nearly a decade working as a big-city and then national journalist, what made you decide to write your first book about the suburbs?

After leaving my suburban hometown in 1994, I didn't really look back. I wanted to write about the gaps between this country's promises and its realities, and I thought the stories that mattered would be found in the cities we'd abandoned and the rural outposts we'd forgotten. But twenty years later, I started seeing a flood of devastating headlines out of Penn Hills. The public schools that had once served my white family so well were raising taxes and slashing services, the result of a monstrous \$172 million debt that is wiping out opportunities for the mostly Black public school parents who live in the community currently. I started to ask myself how all the benefits my family had received from Penn Hills a generation earlier were connected to the cratering fortunes of the families who lived there now, and that question ultimately sent me on a journey across America's fast-changing suburbs.

2. How did you meet the five families you featured in the book? Why did you decide to tell this story through their eyes?

I started off really wanting to show readers the cycle of racialized development and decline that is churning through America's suburbs. Because that cycle plays out over such large geographies and long expanses of time, I felt I had to introduce people to several different places, each of which was experiencing a different stage of that same cycle. So the communities came first. From there, I met the families through a local realtor, a local nonprofit advocacy group, a parent network, the staff of a local elementary school, and a cold call. Ultimately, I determined that the best way to not only show the cycle I was describing, but to really demonstrate its destructive impact, was to foreground how it was shaping the experiences of everyday families to whom lots of readers from diverse backgrounds will hopefully relate.

3. This book draws on extensive research from many different sources. What information was most difficult to uncover? Did you have any 'a-ha' moments when something you learned in your research helped you make sense of the family stories you were following? Why did you choose to include your own white family's story in this book? What did you learn from reckoning with your own racial and class identity while writing this book?

Many suburban school systems are not used to public scrutiny and are very hesitant to grant access and share records. That meant digging into documents and other alternative sources of information. I found the histories of each community and school system especially illuminating. In Lucas, Texas, for example, I ended up poring over the minutes of local council meetings from 20 years ago, which provided a wonderful window into the mindset and priorities of the community when it came to zoning and development. In Atlanta, I spent hours in the national archives, researching a long-forgotten school desegregation case that laid out the exclusionary foundation upon which Gwinnett County was built. In Evanston, I came across old manuals from a late 1960s "Integration Institute"

that closely mirrored much of the racial literacy training the local school district was pursuing more recently. I was stunned to learn that George H.W., Barbara, and George W. Bush all lived in Compton right as its white-dominated social order was starting to unravel, a process that the Black-run California Eagle newspaper did an absolutely extraordinary job of covering. And in my hometown, I learned all kinds of surprising things that I'd never heard or talked about growing up. The most significant was how suburbia was kind of like the movie 'Fight Club;' the first rule of growing up white in Penn Hills was not talking about what it meant to grow up white in Penn Hills. As I gradually learned to break that rule, I found that I started to understand my own experience and the disconnect I felt from my family in new ways that were quite cathartic.

4. What do you hope readers take away from *Disillusioned*?

The unraveling of suburbia is just beginning. As demographic changes accelerate and the realization that we can't keep moving away from our problems sets in, thousands of communities are going to be affected. That's why I argue that the suburb and its public schools are the new frontlines in the fight to realize America's promise. I believe it's important that we as a nation revisit the investment we made in the post-WWII generations of mostly white suburban kids and commit to renewing and extending it to the wildly diverse generation of kids growing up in suburbia today. But I don't think there are any simple policy answers. Instead, we have to reconsider the American Dreams that got us into our current predicament and look for alternative versions of that dream that might sustain us through the turmoil to come. Fortunately, such dreams are already taking root in places like Penn Hills and Compton. But in order for them to grow, we have to nurture them.



On Sale January 23

Disillusioned by Benjamin Herold



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